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Evan Tipton
mt135936@umconnect.umt.edu

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Assessing the Character of Place to Guide Geotourism in Montana: A Case Study of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs, Montana

Evan Tipton, M.S in Resource Conservation

Purpose

This study aims to identify the key attributes that local residents and visitors believe comprise as well as threaten the 'character of their place.' In 2007, the Montana Tourism Advisory Council, a governor-appointed advisory group, adopted the Montana Tourism and Recreation Charter, based on the niche approach to tourism called geotourism. The guiding principle of this charter, the one by which all activities should be measured, is to ensure that geotourism is sustaining or enhancing the character of a place, including its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents. Similarly, a goal in Governor Bullock's Main Street Montana Project addresses the need to "Protect Montana's quality of life for this and future generations." The unknown variable in both the geotourism charter and Main Street Montana Project is the definition of "character of place," which is likely highly linked to quality of life.

Setting the Stage / 'So What?'

Defining and understanding not only the constructs that together clarify what is meant by character of place, but also the threats to this character, will establish a replicable framework offering practical insights to help inform tourism marketers, community leaders, and policy-makers on not just what this 'character of place' is, but how it is constructed and what is needed to protect it.

Methodological Approach

This is an exploratory study that requires a qualitative research approach in order to discover what makes up 'character of place' and the threats to it, from the perspective of local residents and visitors.

1. Photos and videos (much like methods of conversational journal-keeping long used in ethnographic studies of local communities) will be taken by the respondents to capture the imagery, scenery, stories and conversations which they feel best conveys the spirit and the character of the place they call home, as well as the threats to it.
2. Within the visual representations, semi-structured interviews will be conducted to understand the link between the visuals and the meanings that they hold for the respondents.

A representative sample of 15 residents and 15 visitors in each community (60 total respondents) will be asked to participate in the study using nonprobability purposive sampling. The resident subjects will be selected from a list of residents that community members recommend using chain referral methodology. The researchers will make efforts to ensure the resident sample is representative of the local populations based on occupation, gender, and length of residency. The visitor sample will be chosen by intercepts at various events in the community, along the

main streets, or recommended by people within the community (chamber/CVB or accommodation owners).

Leveraging videography in this methodological approach is innovative for several reasons. First, the use of videography in tourism related studies is almost non-existent. While photo-elicitation is a well-documented approach, this research field has not seen the inclusion of video to understand the concept of place attachment or community character. Second, a video allows the image to be constantly developing in front of one's eyes. Having a continuously developing image might produce more prompts that elicit more in-depth conversation about how study participants perceive a place. Third, considering the multidimensional nature of 'character', video adds a dimensionality that static images do not. Lastly, video will allow for sound, which has proven to be important in people's experience of place.

Anticipated Outcomes

1. A 'within' community comparison of resident and visitor depictions and definition of 'character of place' for both communities.
2. A resident comparison of 'character of place' between the two communities.
3. A nonresident comparison of 'character of place' between the two communities.
4. The three comparisons above will be provided in a report on the key traits that comprise and threaten the local character of Whitefish and White Sulphur Springs based on resident perceptions compared to visitor perceptions. The report will include a rich-media presentation on the local 'character of place' for these two communities.
5. A replicable framework for assessing and understanding the common goods and the uncommon spirit that geotourism should seek to sustain and enhance in Montana's local communities will be produced.
6. A short film will be created to highlight the "character of place" story using the videos, photos, and interview data obtained from residents and visitors.
 - a. The Montana Office of Tourism's film department has offered the assistance in creating and editing the short film.